

“From Here to Here”

Opening Day Remarks

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Welcome. And thank you for welcoming me.

Recently, I had what is called a peak experience: the production of a series of programs with the late Joseph Campbell, the great teacher and scholar of mythology. One of Campbell's favorite stories tells of an American visitor to Japan who is puzzled by the Shinto religion. The visitor says to a Shinto priest, "I've been to your ceremonies and to many shrines, but I don't get your ideology and I don't understand your theology." The priest paused to think and then responded, "I don't think we have a theology or an ideology. We dance."

The series opened with that anecdote, and I begin with it today for good luck—I'd like my time here to be as much a peak experience as the series—but also because the story has something to say to us today.

I think you will find that journalists, too, have no theologies, no "isms." Our world moves too quickly. New facts mean new perspectives. New stories open your eyes and open your mind. In fact, one of the most rewarding things about being a reporter is that we're given a license to learn. So, welcome to a lifetime of learning. There will be no time for fixed religions, no dogma, no isms.

We dance.

There is, of course, one ism we do believe in: journalism. And we do have ideals, if not ideology: love of truth and a commitment to public service.

In the words of the founder of this school, Joseph Pulitzer:

"Our Republic and its press will rise or fall together. An able, disinterested, public-spirited press, with trained intelligence to

know the right and courage to do it, can preserve that public virtue without which popular government is a sham and a mockery.”

(I think Pulitzer would have had trouble writing for television.)

You walked past those words when you entered the lobby this morning. They are engraved on a plaque on the wall. They are an ethic, if not a religion.

That’s one of the things that you’ll learn here. If you haven’t thought much about the responsibility of a free press in a democratic society before you arrived, it will be ingrained in you by graduation, starting with our panel discussion today.

I cannot stand here today—on my first day as dean—without a sense of history. We gather here as the beneficiaries of those who built this institution, former deans and directors, who, for seventy-five years, have carried out Pulitzer’s dream.

With us today is one of them, Dean Osborn Elliott, magazine journalist and author, who still serves on our faculty as the George Delacorte Professor in Magazine Journalism. Thank you, Oz, for your good fellowship and outstanding achievement, which have endowed the school with so many friends and supporters.

I stand here, too, on the shoulders of more than three generations of graduates, Columbia’s journalists, who have distinguished themselves, distinguished the university, distinguished the school, and the field. Winners of the Pulitzer Prize, editors and publishers of major American newspapers, reporters for dozens of magazines, in front of the camera and behind the scenes of every important news broadcast. No class has been without them: graduates who have lived up to principle, established standards of excellence, and set models of achievement for us all.

That is our yesterday, the past we share by your being here. And now we face today, a very different today.

You are entering the field at a time of enormous change:

Changes in society.

Changes in technology.

Changes in journalism.

From desktop publishing to billion dollar media empires...

Instantaneous communications systems delivering more information than the human organism can absorb.

There'll be fewer and fewer newspapers and more than one cable news network.

Newspapers are imitating TV news, and TV news, which used to imitate print, is imitating entertainment. (Not to mention that TV entertainment is now imitating news.)

There's a bold new editor in the newsroom, bottom-line business, and it's crunching news as well as numbers.

And journalists themselves are changing. We used to be angry outsiders, crusading against power for the common good. Now the most successful among us are insiders with much more in common with the powerful they cover than they have with the public they serve.

Joseph Pulitzer, if you could see us now.

We live in an age of information.

We live in an age of aggregation.

We live in an age of exploitation and manipulation.

Even politicians plan their campaigns for us.

This is the age of media power.

We set the agenda.

We are the carriers of the culture and its values as much as any other institution.

We are the brokers of information and ideas.

Our decisions tell the people who they are, what they're doing, what's important, and what they need to know.

Never have we needed more education.

Before we can make sense of things for the public, we must be able to make some sense of them for ourselves. Never have we needed to be more skilled, more responsible, more questioning.

So, how are we journalists doing?—to use the words of our notorious Mayor Koch, whom you will meet later this week. The answer: like the Mayor, we're getting bad reviews.

In recent days we have seen the public turn against the media for its coverage of Senator Dan Quayle, and before that, of Gary Hart, and before that, of the Iran-Contra affair—and much more before that.

Surveys find the people think the media arrogant, excessive, biased, unfair, inaccurate, unethical, and preoccupied with bad news. Of course, we can quarrel with the public's perception, but we recognize the portrait. We seem to have become the pit bulls of public life.

The issue is the proper use of power.

Hedrick Smith points out in his book, *The Power Game: How Washington Works*, that sports is the metaphor of our time. He writes that some people treat life as a game instead of seeing it in terms of an ethic or a system of values. In Washington, politicians see politics as a game. Their aim is to be a player, which is to have power or influence on an issue.

They say that when a pickpocket goes into a crowd, all he sees is pockets. When politicians go into a crowd, all they see is competition and conflict, because power is the goal, and competition and conflict are how to reach it.

The problem is that the media have adopted the metaphor of politics and sports. The news shows us a world in conflict, a world of clashing ideologies, of purposes and opinions, a mean-spirited world of winners and losers. Like Washington, we see everything through the lens of power: political power, economic power, cultural power, social power. If you're a player, you're news. If you're winning, you're hard news. If you're losing, you're soft news, or a feature, or maybe not at all. Losers are lucky to get an obit.

Journalists should never take their eyes off power—it's too important—but most people are not from Washington, literally or metaphorically. Their life is not a game. Most people live by a system of values, and they do not recognize their reality in the news. It's a reality that does not reflect their lives. That's partly what the polls are saying.

Last June, when I took this job, one photojournalist assigned to take a picture of me insisted I lean forward over my desk on two clenched fists. "Why?" I asked. "It feels very unnatural." She explained that she wanted me to look like a powerful woman. That, I told her, is not my idea of power. Nor of journalism.

It's time to examine our conventions.

It's time to question our most basic assumptions.

I'm reminded of the Native American I spoke with at a conference in Aspen, Colorado. As you may know, in Indian culture, there is a different concept of time. He told me he used to be a journalist. I said, "Why did you give it up?" He had a simple reply: "I couldn't understand

the purpose of a deadline. What *is* the point of a deadline, anyway? It didn't help my writing. It didn't help the story,” he said. That’s what you call questioning assumptions.

It’s time to ask new questions.

Universities, like this one, are questioning their core curriculums. Maybe we should question ours.

What *is* important?

Who *are* we?

Why should we *care*?

I think of the scholar and Nobel Laureate scientist from this university, the late I. I. Rabi, who said that his mother never asked him what he learned in school that day. She asked instead, “Did you ask any good questions today?” In journalism, as in science, a new question can give us a new picture of our world. Perhaps for journalists, if we are seekers of the truth, science is a more appropriate metaphor than sports.

Most people are looking for good answers.

Good journalists look for the right questions.

New questions show us that there are other patterns to be cut from the fabric of reality, new worlds beyond our habits of thought.

Think of ideas as a beat. To change a mind is to change the world. Think of Hitler, or Einstein, or Gandhi, or King, or Betty Friedan. Ideas are news.

Think of values as a beat. Watch the Presidential campaign, which you’ll be covering, through the lens of values instead of power. The candidates speak of Family; of Freedom; of Equality.

Match their rhetoric about those values to the reality of American life.

Think of power as a value, and perhaps gain some insight into what's happening not only in this society but also in the rest of the world.

Think of beliefs as a beat. Or history. Think of beauty as a beat. And spirit, that sea of meaning in which the fragments of our experience swim. There is news every day on those beats. News that changes the way we see our world, the way we experience our world, the way we understand the world.

We have to remember that when we cover a story we not only report a reality but create a new one for the public. Again, using the metaphor of science, the observer changes the observed.

We report on power, and in the process we make power more visible and, therefore, more powerful.

If we report on ideas, we can make ideas more powerful. And if we are able to find the truth and tell it, we make the truth more powerful.

Take our experience with the series I mentioned earlier, *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth with Bill Moyers*. When Bill and I announced this series, and others, at a press conference almost two years ago, we said we intended to expand the agenda of public affairs reporting. We said our definition of public affairs included history, literature, mythology, and ideas. We spoke about how important it was to American life to expand the dialogue of democracy with other voices that are rarely heard. There were more than one hundred reporters there. Most ignored what we thought was news and concentrated on Bill's departure from CBS, the conventional media power story, which had already been amply covered.

This spring the Campbell series was broadcast. Six one-hours of uninterrupted conversation in which Campbell explained to viewers new ways of seeing and understanding their lives, their crises, their society, their faith, their rituals, their marriages—seeing our

commonality and our differences in another light. The series has produced a phenomenon measuring in every way: ratings, calls for cassettes and transcripts, letters, and reviews. The companion book has been on bestseller lists for months. Campbell's books, written more than thirty years ago, are on the lists, too.

The point of the story is not the success of the series. There's a deeper lesson. It is that people respond overwhelmingly—in large numbers and well—when what we cover illuminates their lives.

That's our public opinion poll—and it's news.

Talcott Williams, the first director of this school, wrote, "This school should have room for the dreamer, if he dreams seriously."

This school does have room for the dreamer, and she dreams seriously. I have been able to dream seriously many times in my work and to make some of these dreams come true. I wish profoundly the same for you.

But now the day begins, and this is a school of reality, and discipline, as well as dreams. Talcott Williams wrote:

"The student must feel the arduous, unrelenting daily pressure of the newspaper office or he will not be ready for it, when it comes. Our students must be ready for scanty rations, long marches, and the hardy assault."

Times have changed. The course has changed. But the pulse and the pace remain.

Borrowing Williams's military metaphor: This year will be a kind of intellectual boot camp preparing you for the armed forces of today's traditions.

There are rules. You'll go on marathon marches through neck-deep rivers of information—about the city, its institutions, its politics, its people. You will be stretched on the

rack of learning in as many subjects as you can absorb. And you will daily walk that tightrope between the story and the deadline, which continues to be with us, I must report.

We can get you in shape if you master the action, and you'll leave here with the tools of the craft, ready to think for yourself and to interpret for the public.

But, let me warn you: however difficult you find it here, it is more difficult out there. In this business, if you haven't worked too hard, or fought too hard, or gotten too angry, you aren't doing the job. And if you are doing the job, you will also have as much living, as much learning, and as much fun.

When I walked through this door twenty-eight years ago, I had no idea that I had bought a round-trip ticket. I had no idea how arduous, how exhilarating, how rewarding it was going to be to get from here to...here.

Joseph Campbell taught me that the circle is nature's perfect form. So returning here is a kind of perfection for me. I feel today that this is not only my homecoming but a renewed commitment to the ideas and ideals that have inspired this institution and made it a unique and outstanding school of journalism for seventy-five years.

As I suggested at the beginning, I have no theology. I am not a fundamentalist longing for the past. I am not a blind worshipper of the old-time religion. Nor am I a radical guru of alternative news. I do champion ideas that give meaning to information, ideals that outweigh expedience, and the vision to which the school is committed: to establish and embody standards of excellence for the practice of journalism.

In the words of Joseph Pulitzer: Principle. Courage. Ethics.

And in the words of Talcott Williams: High standards. High hazards. And high hopes.

And now: Shall we dance?